Mount Lebanon Shakers Church Family
About 1.2 miles southeast of
New Lebanon, on rural road
New Lebanon Vicinity
Columbia County
New York

HABS No. NY-3291

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
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143 South Third Street
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. NY-3291

MOUNT LEBANON SHAKERS CHURCH FAMILY

Location: About 1.2 miles southeast of New Lebanon, on rural road, New Lebanon Vicinity, Columbia County, New York.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Shaker Community near New Lebanon, New York, had a unique and pre-eminent place in the Shaker world. It was the center from which the Shaker movement in the 19th century drew its inspiration, from which most of the Shaker missionaries left for the frontier lands of the west to proselytize with the truth that they thought was theirs. And it was from Mount Lebanon that binding rules and decrees were passed to other Shaker communities as far distant as Kentucky and Florida. It became the heart and mind of a theocracy that inevitably forged the chains that bound it to its own extinction.

The history of the Shakers on this western slope of the Taconic Mountain range, above the small New York town of New Lebanon, becomes almost the history of that land itself since the advent of white settlers. The "approach" to religion and the spiritual life that was characteristic of these members of the sect, that always felt itself outside the flow of human society, was established in many ways in this New York-Massachusetts boundary territory years before the followers of Mother Ann thought to make converts there. As early as the 1730's (in many sections of New England) there was a spirit of religious revival that in succeeding decades was to be stoked by evangelistic tours of numerous preachers. The families that had settled around New Lebanon were no strangers to the excesses that accompanied such revivals, and even the most stable, conservative, and sceptical of men seemed easily to succumb to the "magic" of these prayer meetings. However, most of the settlers returned to the more mundane existence of clearing and farming the land and to ordinary family life when the enthusiasm and fervor cooled. Their level-headedness and ultimate practicality - qualities which were so important in the emerging Yankee "personality" - led them to return to the ordinary life after these refreshing, and frequently disillusioning interludes in which they sought to obtain another world.

In the summer of 1779 a revival broke out in the area of New Lebanon and nearby Hancock, Massachusetts. A number of the meetings were held on the property of a prosperous farmer, George Darrow, who eventually donated the land that became the center of the New Lebanon Shaker community. "Here there was a nightly scene of wild, exalted preaching; of visions, signs, operations, and prophetic utterances; of shouting, screaming, and the falling of

men and women 'as if wounded in battle'."[1] "The revival lasted all summer. All sorts of people attended the meetings: young, old, middle-aged; Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists; men and women from poor and ignorant families, college graduates. The whole district was like one great revival meeting."[2] Yet, when the summer began to change into autumn and then into winter, few were able to retain the ardor and hope that had been the blessing of the warm summer months. The meetings disbanded, and two of the disillusioned, who set about in March of the next year (1780) evidently to find other "promised lands" further west, by chance stopped at Mother Ann's community of Niskeyuna (later called the Watervliet community). Impressed by the sincerity of Mother Ann and her small group of followers and by the physical manifestations of their spiritual life that in many ways resemble those of the recent revivals, they returned to inform the few leaders at New Lebanon, who had retained the fervor of the summer meetings, of this sect that in so many ways promised to fulfill their hopes and aspirations. Around this core the Shaker movement at New Lebanon began to grow.

> "There is some confusion in the records of early Shaker settlements between the date of the founding and that of the 'gathering' of the different communities. The date of founding or starting was somewhat indefinite, since it might mean only the meeting together of two or three converts. Usually these early Believers worshipped in private houses or even out of doors. There was as yet no attempt at formal organization even in centers like New Lebanon and Harvard; and the members continued living with their own 'natural' families. 'Gathering,' however, or 'gathering into gospel order,' meant joining together in communal living. It also included the signing of a covenant. None of the societies were 'gathered' in this sense until 1787, three years after the death of Mother Ann; but a good many were founded in the four years of her ministry between 1780 and 1784."[3]

The Shakers at New Lebanon were perhaps the strongest and most active of the Shaker communities by the late 1780's. With the lands and buildings donated by the Darrow brothers, and with the goods - in most cases rather limited - of many others who embraced this belief, the physical hardships of the first few years were gradually overcome. Already on October 15, 1785 the first meetinghouse was raised. It was a plain, gambrel-roofed structure that was destined to become the typical meetinghouse type until 1805. Despite the simplicity and general use of this style of architecture in New England and New York, the building became "nevertheless the symbol of a faith established, the beginning of the church as 'an outward visible order.'"[4]

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[1]Edward Deming Andrews. The People Called Shakers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 18.

[2]Marguerite Fellows Melcher. The Shaker Adventure (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1941), p. 20.

[3]Ibid. pp. 34-5.

[4]Edward Deming Andrews. The People Called Shakers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 51

It was also this year, 1785, in which the first community was "gathered into Society Order;" the communal and "family" living that was to become one of the main characteristics of Shaker life had been started. With the first regular assembly (January 29, 1786) in the meetinghouse the leading Shakers decided to "withdraw" from the world. No longer were those who professed belief in the teachings of the Shakers free to live in society.

> "As numbers increased and activities multiplied it became necessary to work, to rest, to worship in unison. And New Lebanon made the pattern for all of the other Shaker societies to follow. New Lebanon started the machinery of Shaker government: the system of elders and eldresses, deacons and deaconesses, trustees both male and female, to carry on the religious teachings, the social regulations, the practical business affairs of the Shakers for well over a hundred years."[5]

Already by 1788 most of the believers in this area of eastern New York were gathered at New Lebanon, and the covenant that was signed by each Shaker who vowed a permanent "allegiance" to the sect had been written. This covenant was to be used, with few variations in wording, by all Shaker communities. Also at this early date the "family" system was adopted. Essentially the "family" was of the greatest importance in the life of the average believer, for it was with the members of his family that he lived, ate, worked, and worshipped. There was even eventually little opportunity in his daily life for him to know members of other families well, even though they might live in the same community.

Even before the establishment of "gospel order," the believers understood that in order to develop their spiritual lives they had to be free of the more mundane physical wants, and they followed the advice of Mother Ann, who insisted on the assiduous development of the practical virtues. Often the members of the sect continued to pursue the particular occupation that they had had in the world, and in general each "family" specialized in certain occupations.

> "By 1789 a tannery [possibly HABS #NY-3303], fulling mill, clothing shop, chair factory, blacksmith shop, and cobbler's shop were in full operation, manufacturing such articles as saddles and saddlebags, harnesses, leather mittens, whips and whiplashes, dressed cloth, felt hats, chairs, coopers' ware, wrought nails, hoes, shoe and stock buckles, boots, and shoes. Many of the pursuits were housed in the brethren's shop built that year. [HABS #NY-3293 is probably a later structure]. The Shaker garden-seed industry was also started

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[5]Marguerite Fellows Melcher. The Shaker Adventure (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1941), p. 56

> in 1789, and the farm produced, among other crops, three thousand bushels of potatoes. Meanwhile the sisterhood was occupied with various household arts, chief among which were the spinning and dyeing of yarn and the weaving and dressing of cloth. A 'spin-shop' was erected in 1791. On 21 April of the same year an office building [possibly HABS #NY-3299] known as the East House was raised for the accommodation of the outer court and a clearing house for Shaker products consigned to the world."[6]

By 1828 the drying of corn had become a major industry at New Lebanon, and in the 19th century a washing machine was invented and manufactured there. (The Canterbury, New Hampshire community later improved it and became the major center for its manufacture). New Lebanon also became the center for the manufacture of the well-known Shaker chair - that article that so much appeals to present-day collectors and museums. All of this industry naturally demanded housing that would not only provide ample space, but would also conform to the specialized demands of any trade or occupation. So the Shaker mind, which always sought to find the most felicitous manner to do any labor so that man would be relieved of the tediousness that infringed upon spiritual development, found an architecture which would best meet these needs.

Many 19th century accounts of the Shaker community at New Lebanon comment upon the great beauty of this region of New York and Massachusetts. Even the more jaded tastes of the well-traveled 20th century man cannot fail to note the "magic of the area.

> "New Lebanon. . .has as beautiful a situation as one could find anywhere: a side hill with a view out over a wide fertile valley to low pleasant hills beyond. On either side of the country road that runs over this long shelf on the western slope of the hill lie the buildings of four of the Shaker families which composed the New Lebanon Society. The other four that brought the total to eight when the Society was most prosperous, were situated nearby: two of them in the adjoining town of Canaan, New York. East of the road the wooded hill rises steeply enough to ensure a good water supply; on the west the sunny farm lands slope away down to the broad valley below."[7]

By 1839 the Shaker community of New Lebanon had prospered to such a degree that it had built 125 buildings and owned 2,292 acres

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[6]Edward Deming Andrews. The People Called Shakers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 57-8.

[7]Marguerite Fellows Melcher. The Shaker Adventure (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1941), pp. 96-7.

of land. This prosperity was to last through the Civil War into the last decades of the 19th century, and in many respects it coincided with the active life of Elder Frederick Evans, who had been born in England,and eventually became the head of the entire Shaker church. There seem to be few phases of Shaker life that were not influenced by this man who, even though a Shaker, traveled to Europe, met often with famous, influential contemporaries, and carried on a correspondence with Tolstoy. His ideas on diet and sanitation even became important considerations for architecture. Though the Shakers seem always to have had a high regard for the virtue of cleanliness and moderation, the articulate Evans with his publications and theories or "principles of dietctics" made them even more conscious of the desirability of such practices. Evidentally - as Nordhoff in his 1875 publication, Communistic Societies of the United States, gave proof of - these principles, if followed, increased the longevity of the average person.

> "While these views [Evans' view of 'dietetics'] were the opinion of one person, a natural reformer, they were not unrepresentative of Shaker practice. The vent pipes over the lamps, the slots placed between the two sashes of every window, and the holes in the baseboards in the halls and under the radiators in the gathering rooms were additional evidences of a concern for fresh air. Baths, sinks, and water closets were well ventilated. Pure spring water was ingeniously piped for refrigeration."[8]

All of these necessarily affected architectural design.

Another facet of the complexity that is a human being, his mind, was not neglected by the Shaker community either. Though the majority of converts to this sect were from humble backgrounds, and though there was little effort at education until 1808, once the Shakers became convinced of the efficacy of education, they became, in a narrow sense, leaders in the field. Their system of education in the middle decades of the 19th century was noted and admired by many of the foremost educators of the period. The New Lebanon community school (HABS #NY-3259) was built around 1839 to displace family schools and still stands, used as a residence by a member of the Darrow School administration. One wonders how many rural schools of this period could favorably compare with this building.

All of the early structures at New Lebanon were remodeled around 1805 to conform with the emerging Shaker "personality." The virtues that they cultivated were to be the virtues that would dictate their building activity. Simplicity, honesty, practicality, - all to be clichés for generations of later American and European

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[8]Edward Deming Andrews. The People Called Shakers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 195.

architects - were to be the rules which guided them in their building. And "once they had hit upon a style of architecture that seemed best suited to the use for which the building was intended, it was logical and practical for that style to be employed throughout Shakerdom wherever such a building was needed. The details might be varied in the different societies; the general plan remained the same."[9] Earlier buildings, such as the 1785 Meetinghouse (see Nordhoff print included in HABS #NY-3301) , were modified. If the notes on photographs from the 1920's and 1930's which were presented by New York State to the Historic American Buildings Survey, are accurate The Church Family Seed House (HABS #NY-3301) is actually the same structure, then we have a clear example of how an early typical New England-New York gambrel-roofed structure was modified as the Shakers became more aware of themselves as an isolated group with a personality and tradition. Many other structures went through a similar metamorphosis; however, now because of limited documentation and the scarcity of early views with which to make comparison, and because of deterioration and the great number of fires that plagued the Shakers ("in 1875 the Church Family at Mt. Lebanon lost eight buildings in a single day"),[10] it is difficult to illustrate this change in a concrete way.

Nearly forty years after the first meetinghouse was constructed at the New Lebanon community, a new meetinghouse was constructed (1824). The size and design of this unusual "bow-roofed" structure indicates the prosperity of industrious people, and although it is unusual and unique - as is apropos for the main meetinghouse in the most important of Shaker communities - it, nevertheless, is not markedly different from other meetinghouses in plan.

> "The common pattern of the Shaker churches was a rectangular, hip roofed building of two and a half stories. . . .In the long side of the church which faced the lawn between the maples and, beyond the lawn, the road, were two doors - the left for the men, the right for the women. Three windows stood between the doors, and another window was set at each end of the facade. . . .Inside the church was a large assembly hall with wood paneling up to the window sills. . .and rows of wooden pegs set into two peg boards between five and six feet from the floor. The walls and ceilings were white, the woodwork, blue."[11]

Many find that the extreme straightforwardness, simplicity, and practicality of Shaker architecture make for the "uninteresting"

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[9]Marguerite Fellows Melcher. The Shaker Adventure (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1941), p. 196.

[10]Ibid. p. 238.

[11]Ibid. p. 196-7.

and "drab." Yet perhaps a full consciousness of the basic aim of architecture and an absence of an aesthetic approach naturally had to result in good architecture. And it was good because it lacked pretentiousness. It was only with the extreme self-consciousness, that is so much a part of the American architectural scene of the later decades of the 19th century, and its gradual encroachment of this consciousness on the Shaker community, that Shaker architecture became ill-proportioned and unremarkable. Shaker structures before the Civil War period all had a marked similarity - it seemed that all human functions had been "reduced" to a common denominator that they had found in their religion. (Perhaps this similarity and lack of complexity is why the study of Shaker architecture has not attracted the attention of major American architectural historians).

New Lebanon buildings were generally of stone or wood painted white. It seems that only at a later period, when the influence of the world was becoming stronger, that they built brick buildings, e.g., the 1875 Main Dwelling House (HABS #NY-3298) or the 1875 Ministry's Workshop (HABS #NY-3255). Brick buildings, because of the great number of fires - whether caused by accident or incendiary - were a necessity in a rural area. Also by the seventies another of the characteristic features of Shaker architecture had been relinquished. One of the most notable architectural features of both Watervliet and New Lebanon (by this time, 1861, renamed Mount Lebanon), was the segmental and single-pitched canopies that projected without visual support over entryways. Compare the Ministry's entrance of the Meetinghouse to the main entrance of the Main Dwelling. By the time The Main Dwelling was constructed workmen from the world often had to be called in not only for farm help but also for the more skilled labors. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the Shakers could not survive with strength in the 20th century - self-sufficiency had, and has, become almost an impossibility.

However, Shaker "art" with its many virtues in many ways was to make a valiant fight for existence until well into the 20th century. One of the best known of their industries, the chair industry, continued up until 1940 - in a greatly limited way - at Mount Lebanon at the South Family.

"In 1933 the New Lebanon society sold its Church Family buildings and land to the founders of the Lebanon School for boys - lately reorganized and renamed the Darrow School in honor of the early Shaker, George Darrow, upon whose homesite the first church was built."[12] The Center Family property also was sold to the Darrow School, the Second Family in 1940 to private owners, and the North Family eventually to a religious group for a camp. By 1947 the Mount Lebanon Shaker community no longer existed.

In terms of the history of mankind the Shakers played one of the most minor of rôles; their "message"to the world was, and is,

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[12]Ibid. p. 261.

negligible. Yet their aspirations were great and the ideals that they followed were in general the ideals of enlightened mankind. Their crafts and architecture are testimony of their simple ideas, and still remain today, in constantly decreasing number, to remind us that beauty is not only the product of the sophisticate and genius but of the uneducated and humble.

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